

their very freedoms that he was willing to die for. Destroying the flag is tantamount to physically assaulting those heroes who would lay down their lives for their country. It is against the law for one American to assault another, and so should it be against the law for one American to assault an entire class of American heroes.

Mr. Speaker, we need to honor America's heroes and pass the resolution.

Mr. CONYERS. Mr. Speaker, I yield 8 minutes to the gentleman from New York (Mr. ACKERMAN).

(Mr. ACKERMAN asked and was given permission to revise and extend his remarks.)

Mr. ACKERMAN. Mr. Speaker, the Founding Fathers must be very puzzled looking down on us today. Instead of seeing us dealing with the very real challenges that face our Nation, they see us laboring again under this compulsion to amend the document that underpins our democracy. They see a house of dwarfs trying to give this government a great new power at the expense of the people and, for the first time, to stifle dissenters and the way in which they dissent.

The threat must be great, they must be saying, to justify changing the Bill of Rights for the first time and decreasing rather than increasing the rights of the people. They see our beloved Bill of Rights being eroded into the Bill of Rights and Restrictions.

What is the threat? What is the threat, Mr. Speaker? I ask again, what is the threat? Is our democracy at risk? What is the crisis to the Republic? What is the challenge to our way of life? Where is our belief system being threatened? Are people jumping from behind parked cars, waving burning flags at us, trying to prevent us from getting to work and causing America to grind to a halt?

Mr. Speaker, do we really believe that we are under such a siege because of a few lose cannons? Do we need to change our Constitution to save our democracy, or are we simply offended?

The real threat to our society is not the occasional burning of a flag, but the permanent banning of the burners. The real threat is that some of us have now mistaken the flag for a religious icon to be worshipped as pagans would, rather than to be kept as the beloved symbol of our freedom that is to be cherished.

These rare but vile acts of desecration that have been cited by those who would propose changing our founding document do not threaten anybody. If a jerk burns a flag, America is not threatened. If a jerk burns a flag, democracy is not under siege. If a jerk burns a flag, freedom is not at risk and we are not threatened. My colleagues, we are offended; and to change our Constitution because someone offends us is in itself unconscionable.

Mr. Speaker, the courts have said that the flag stands for the right to burn the flag. The Nazis and the Fascists and the Imperial Japanese Army

combined could not diminish the constitutional right of even one single American. Yet, in an act of cowardice, we are about to do what they could not.

Mr. Speaker, where are the patriots? Where are the patriots? Whatever happened to fighting to the death for the rights of someone with whom we disagree? We now choose, instead, to react by taking away the right to protest. Even a despicable low-life malcontent has a right to disagree, and he has the right to disagree in an obnoxious fashion if he wishes. That is the true test of free expression, and we are about to fail that test.

Real patriots choose freedom over symbolism. That is the ultimate contest between substance and form. Why does the flag need protecting? Is it an endangered species? Burning one flag or burning 1,000 flags does not endanger it. It is but a symbol. But change just one word of the Constitution of this great Nation, and it and we will never be the same.

We cannot destroy a symbol. Yes, people have burnt the flag, but, Mr. Speaker, it still exists. There it is, hanging right in back of us. It represents our beliefs.

Poets and patriots will tell us men have died for the flag, but that language itself is symbolic language. People do not die for symbols. They fight and they die for freedom. They fight and they die for democracy. They fight and they die for values. To fight and die for the flag is to fight and die for the cause in which we believe. Today some would have us change all of that.

We love and we honor and respect our flag for that which it represents. It is different from all other flags. I notice in the amendment that we do not make it illegal to burn someone else's flag in someone else's country, and that is because our flag is different.

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No, not because of the colors or the shape or the design. They mostly have stars and some have stripes and scores and dozens are red, white, and blue.

Our flag is unique because it represents our unique values. It represents tolerance for dissent. This country was founded by dissenters that others found obnoxious.

What is a dissenter? In this case it is a social protester who feels so strongly about an issue that he would stoop so low as to try to get under our skin, to try to rile us up to prove his point, and to have us react by making this great Nation less than it was.

How do we react? Dictators and dictatorships make political prisoners of those who burn their Nation's flags, not democracies. We tolerate dissent and dissenters, even the despicable dissenters.

What is the flag, Mr. Speaker? The American flag? Yes, it is a piece of cloth. It is red, it is white and blue. It has 50 stars and 13 stripes. But if we pass this amendment and desecrators

decide to start a cottage industry and make flags with 55 stars and burn them, will we rush to the floor to amend the Constitution again?

If they add a stripe or two and set it ablaze, surely it would look like our flag, but is it? Do we rush in and count the stripes before we determine whether or not we are constitutionally offended? What if the stripes are orange instead of red? How do we interpret that? What mischief do we do here? If it is a full color, full-sized picture of a flag that they burn, is it a crime to desecrate a symbol of a symbol? What are we doing?

Our beloved flag represents this great Nation, Mr. Speaker. We love our flag because there is a republic for which it stands, made great by a Constitution that we have sworn to protect, a Constitution given to our care by giants and about to be nibbled to death by dwarfs.

Mr. Speaker, I call upon the patriots of the House to rise and to defend the Constitution, to resist the temptation to drape ourselves in the flag and to hold sacred the Bill of Rights. Defend our Constitution. I urge the defeat of this ill-conceived amendment.

Mr. SENSENBRENNER. Mr. Speaker, I yield 5 minutes to the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. HYDE), the distinguished former chairman of the Committee on the Judiciary.

(Mr. HYDE asked and was given permission to revise and extend his remarks.)

Mr. HYDE. Mr. Speaker, I do not intend to ascribe cowardice or lack of patriotism to people who disagree with me, although I listened to the last speaker ask, where are the patriots? I could direct him to some. Try BOB STUMP who lied about his age so he could enlist in the Navy in World War II. There are plenty of patriots around. I have earned the right to stand here and debate this issue because I fought in combat in the South Pacific in World War II. I like to think I am almost as patriotic as the gentleman named ACKERMAN.

I heard rights, rights, rights. Not one word about responsibility. Responsibility. But that is part of this debate. This is a good debate. We ought to once in a while look at our core principles and see if there is anything that distinguishes us from the rest of the world.

We look around this Chamber and we see the splendid diversity of America. We see men and women whose great grandparents came from virtually every corner of the globe. What holds this democratic community together? A common commitment to certain moral norms. That is the foundation of our democratic experiment.

Human beings do not live by abstract ideas alone. Those ideas are embodied in symbols. And what is a symbol? A symbol is more than a sign. A sign conveys information. A symbol is much more richly textured. A symbol is material reality that makes a spiritual reality present among us. An octagonal